

The Accident*

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"Oh, my God! That child!" my mother cried out in an alien voice quivering with the vibrato of absolute horror. Wholly without warning, almost abreast of us in the adjacent lane, a small child darted from a line of parked vehicles, falling beneath the wheels of an oncoming car.

My mother was driving me to my weekly piano lesson. Lost in some Bach prelude, I saw none of the tragedy erupting about me. My mother's cry penetrated my polyphonic reverie instantaneously; the urgency in her voice, however, confused me. I thought that *we* had struck the child. But the circle forming in the other lane, the nurse springing from the car ahead, the serviceman fighting his way through the crowd soon explained. As if the crowd sensed the presence of the Angel of Death, a forcibly hushed silence hung over the street.

Only then could I see her—a small heap lying in a puddle of blood, very still, very silent. Vaguely I remember the nurse giving orders and people gliding into their homes like ghosts fearful of attracting the attention of the living. A blanket—I remember that one of the returning ghosts handed me a blanket which I, equally ghostlike, handed to the nurse who was treating the child for shock. Kneeling there in the blood, the serviceman lifted the little girl's head ever so slightly in preparation for mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The entire back of her head was a crimson mass; blood was slowly but steadily creeping through her pale hair, absorbing the straw-like hue in its virulent blush. And the puddle in the street kept growing.

Suddenly I grew conscious of the people in this ghastly landscape. Not the crowd—it was an indivisible mass, one whole with no unique, identifiable parts. I became aware of the people who were one with the tragedy—the child's mother and the boy who had been driving the car that had struck the girl. Only minutes had passed since the child had been injured, though time applies to the accident only in retrospect. Time, a creation of man for ticking off the moments of

his existence, ceased to function in a situation so pervaded by an inhuman sense of the threadlike division between life and death. Gradually I became aware of the mother's anguished screams and her frustrated hysteria as an arm of the crowd reached out and held her away from her child, whose life ebbed out onto the dirty pavement. Her incoherent moans blended subtly into the banshee wail of the approaching ambulance.

Only then did I notice the boy who stood quietly with the police. Although he was twenty years old, according to the next day's newspaper story, I had seen him often in the high school's halls. An extremely quiet boy, rather odd and a little shabby he had always seemed to me. He had been driving only twenty miles an hour, which somehow seemed very typical and very sad, though the child would surely be dead had he been driving any faster. Oddly enough, he seemed like a Jainist priest (though I am certain he has never heard of the Jains), trying with a real and conscious effort not to injure any living thing. It seemed so totally cruel of some malign fate to urge the child under his wheels. Of course no legal action was taken against him—the paper, the next day, put it this way: "The witnesses agreed that he could not possibly have stopped in time nor have done anything more to avert striking the child." When I saw him in the halls the following weeks, I knew that I should speak, but I hurried by, ashamed and very, very sorry.

Many days and tears passed before I could cope with the memory of that day. I could not—do not even now—understand why that child had to suffer what she did. Beyond the shock of my first brush with death lay the overwhelming sense of injustice. The child was so innocent: to strike her down before she even knew what life was, before she could develop whatever talents lay dormant within her, seemed cruel beyond intelligibility. If there had been some compelling reason why she should be condemned to live with a seriously damaged mind . . . But what reason can there be for the near destruction of a child who knows neither how to hurt nor destroy?

And what about the boy? How could he forget the inevitable feeling of guilt, of responsibility, for an accident in no way his fault? There is nothing of justice in the murderous fates pinning their guilt onto him.

How can this be natural justice when it preserves no balance of nature; divine justice when it punishes no evil; human justice when no human intent was involved? How, then, can it be termed *just* at all? The only comfort to be drawn from the incident at all is, perhaps, the sense of dependability that springs from the knowledge that the infringement of a certain physical law inevitably results in a particular consequence. And what comfort is there in that for the child or the boy?